

# The reign of Henry IV

PART I

by

A. L. ROWSE



By courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery

HENRY IV (1399-1413) by an unknown artist.

During the troubrous reign that began when he dethroned his cousin Richard, Henry encountered a long series of exhausting crises. He met his troubles, however, with resilience and courage.

ON SEPTEMBER 30TH, 1399, Henry IV had attained 'the world, the power and the glory' in taking his cousin Richard's throne; but he never knew any peace of mind or body again. His reign was full of trouble and anxiety, crisis after crisis, wearing down this strong energetic man, until well before the end he was prostrated with illnesses, when only in his forties a hopelessly sick man. Born in the same year as Richard, 1367, Henry was only forty-six when he died. It is as if the strain of kingship exhausted the strength of even the toughest.

We can see what medieval people thought, or rather how they reacted, from the ill omens at Henry's coronation that Adam of Usk

recorded in his *Chronicon*. 'Three ensigns of royalty foreshadowed for him three misfortunes. First, in the procession he lost one of his coronation shoes: whence, in the first place, the commons who rose up against him hated him ever after all his life long. Secondly, one of the golden spurs fell off: whence, in the second place, the soldiery opposed him in rebellion. Thirdly, at the banquet a sudden gust of wind carried away the crown from his head: whence, in the last place, he was set aside from his kingdom and supplanted by Prince Henry.' Later on, the chronicler remembered further details. 'One of the nobles [gold coins], at the time of his making the offering in the coronation Mass, fell from his hand to the ground; which then I



By courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery

RICHARD II (1377-1399); from his effigy in Westminster Abbey by Nicholas Broker and Godfrey Prest.

with others standing by sought for diligently and, when found, it was offered by him.' Adam adds that after the anointing 'there ensued such a growth of lice, especially on his head, that he neither grew hair, nor could he have his head uncovered for many months.' Magnificence and inefficiency, splendour and lice—there we have the Middle Ages.

First and last and all the time, it was the circumstances in which he took the throne that raised up enemies to challenge him in turn, and constituted a constant weakness to his position. Then there were external enemies. Richard had been France's ally, married to the French King's daughter; renewed hostility took the place of alliance, and that brought the Scots down on the Border, where the doubtful Percy family ruled like semi-independent princes. Next Henry was faced by a wholly unexpected national uprising under Glendower in Wales, which lasted for years and for which the King was in no way to blame (though the English were). A far better king than Richard, Henry was in a far worse situation.

Henry IV never had any respite. 'There were years when Scotland, Wales, France (including both Calais and Gascony), as well as Ireland, called for a burden of military expenditure with which no English monarch had been faced since the end of Edward I's reign.'<sup>1</sup> That had been a century before. 'In the country at large a government continually asking for money is bound to become disliked and, when the first enthusiasm for Henry had faded under the strain of taxation and the demand for loans to the crown, he was even less popular than his predecessor.' Excellent politician that he was, Henry knew that the honeymoon would not last long; it was on account of that that he had been resolved to maintain the full powers of the Crown in taking over. 'Tolerant and polite, Henry made what concessions he could, but was determined to uphold his own prerogative and to govern through the administrators closest to himself. . . . All these anxieties Henry met with courage and resilience. The prolonged effort cost him his nervous health and the house of Lancaster much political good will.'

<sup>1</sup>E. F. Jacob, *The Fifteenth Century, 1399-1485* (Oxford History of England), 30.

Anxious to exert all the powers of the English monarchy and to allow no diminution of its prestige, in his first year of rule Henry sought a showdown with Scotland—the perennial objective of English policy to break the Franco-Scottish alliance. All he achieved was a march across the Border as far as Edinburgh, which would not surrender, while Scottish guerrillas harassed his communications, already stretched beyond the capacity of his commissariat. On his way back to London, he heard the first news of Owen Glendower's rising in North Wales, a cloud no larger than a man's hand, which was to overcast much of the rest of his reign with all the consequences and troubles of a national resistance.

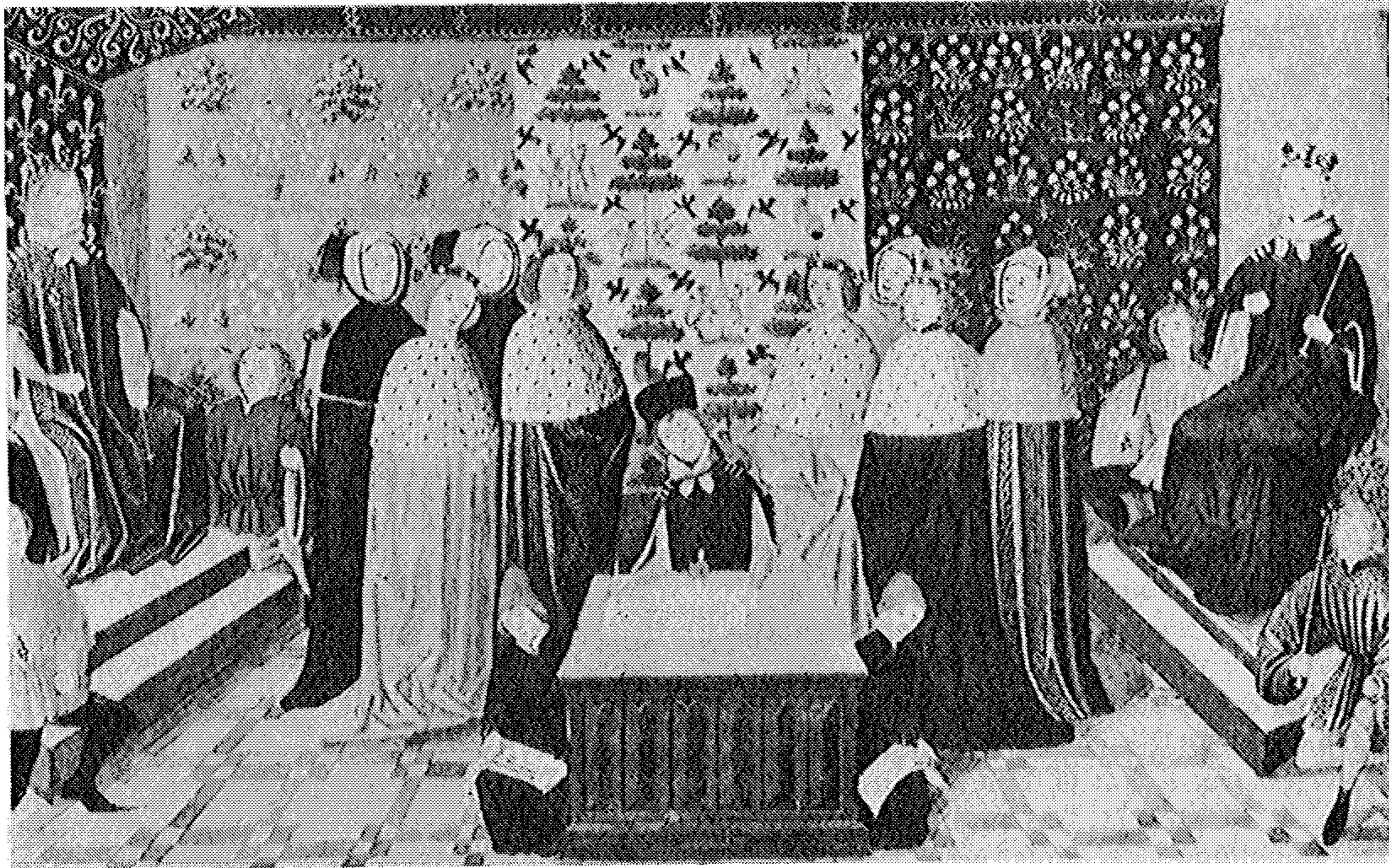
That Christmas, Henry had to entertain the Greek Emperor, arrived to ask succour against the advance of the Turks. This also conferred an honour upon the new royal house and turned out expensive. Adam of Usk tells us that the Emperor, Manuel II, was well entertained by Henry, 'abiding with him at very great cost for two months, being also comforted at his departure with very great gifts'. It would seem that one of Henry's faults was that he was probably too generous. The chronicler was struck by the *outré* appearance of the Greeks, as the Greeks were struck by the *outré* appearance of the English. 'The Emperor always walked with his men, dressed alike and in one colour, namely white, in long robes cut like tabards; he finding fault with the many fashions and distinctions in dress of the English, wherein he said that fickleness and changeable temper was betokened.'

With France, Henry hoped to maintain peace and even to extend Richard's alliance. He was not willing to return the little Queen Isabel, still less her dowry. Henry wished to retain both within the kingdom, and proposed that she might be married to his son and heir, Prince Henry. The French were hostile and would have none of it. In the summer of 1401 the girl, not yet twelve, had to be returned: Adam of Usk witnessed her departure from London, 'clad in mourning weeds, and showing a countenance of lowering and evil aspect to King Henry and scarce opening her lips as she went her way'. Richard had certainly had the faculty of attaching those near him to himself.

Owen Glendower (Glyn Dwr) was descended from the princes of North Wales, and held directly from the Crown considerable lands which his ancestors had ruled. He had been brought up a good deal in England, was a student at the Inns of Court and had been on one of the Scottish expeditions on which he was observed wearing the scarlet feather of a flamingo in his helmet. Glendower knew England and understood the situation there very well. He was a chivalrous squire, a gentleman of birth and breeding, an important land-owner among his own people—and was treated with scant justice by Grey, Lord of Ruthin, a characteristically heavy-handed English magnate, an Easterner. Behind Glendower's protest there was all the pent-up feeling of the Welsh against English insensitiveness and disregard of their susceptibilities.

Driven beyond endurance, Glendower burned Ruthin and ravaged English settlements along the coast. He would have been content to be reinstated in his own lands: he understood the value of compromise, and it seems that he had the sympathies of the Percies—Harry Hotspur, son of the Earl of Northumberland, was Justiciar of North Wales under the nominal rule of Prince Henry. But Glendower had gone too far; his estates were confiscated and himself declared a traitor. He thereupon widened his appeal, turned the struggle into a national resistance of the Welsh, held out year after year, and never did surrender. He outlived Henry IV, died, still uncaught, in a place unknown, a figure of folk-legend.

Naturally he appealed to the bards, who in turn whipped up Welsh sentiment all over the little country in his favour. They sang of the portents at his birth; undoubtedly the Welsh weather worked on his behalf. For three years in succession the King led an expedition into the fastnesses of North Wales without subduing the rebellion, or catching its leader or achieving much. In 1402 quite unusual weather conditions caused much hardship to the expeditionary force and held up operations. Meanwhile the rebellion made progress, broadened its base. Welsh students left Oxford to take part, Welsh labourers deserted English fields to go home and serve under Glendower's standard of the golden dragon. He made himself something



From 'An Illustrated History of England' by André Maurois. Bodley Head, 1963

*A treaty is drawn up, in March 1396, between Richard II and Charles VI of France; 'with France, Henry helped to maintain peace and even to extend Richard's alliance'. From an illustrated manuscript in the British Museum.*

of an international figure with his appeals for support to France and Scotland, fellow-Celts in Ireland and Brittany, his grandiose plans for a Welsh university and a separate archbishopric at St. David's, his claim to be regarded as Prince of Wales.

What we now know is that the Tudor family in Anglesey, cousins of Glendower, were his strong supporters and the backbone of the resistance. It was two Tudor brothers who captured Conway Castle in 1401. In 1402 Glendower appeared in South Wales, Glamorgan rose in revolt and shortly the whole of Wales was affected. In that same year Glendower captured Edmund Mortimer, younger brother of the late Earl of March, of the senior royal line of descent; what portended worse, Mortimer married Glendower's daughter. Henry's government, which had under-estimated the seriousness of the rising at first, was at its wit's end to find the means to support campaign after campaign in remote, inaccessible Wales. Hotspur, a choleric, impatient, fighting type, grew dissatisfied with the inadequate means he

was given, threw up his post and retired to the North where he was at home. To placate the too powerful Percies, Thomas Percy, Earl of Worcester, was made Lieutenant of South Wales and tutor to Prince Henry.

By contrast with the King's ill-success in Wales, the Percies won a resounding victory over the Scots in 1402 at Homildon Hill. A number of Scottish nobles were killed, but many more were taken prisoner. This further exacerbated the jealousies between the Percies and the King; for Hotspur refused to hand over the Earl of Douglas, whose ransom he meant to keep to recoup himself for the losses he had incurred in Henry's service. This was wrongful, for by custom the Crown had the right to the chief captures, and the King was just as much in want of money as those overmighty subjects, the Percies. Perhaps their triumph over the Scots went to their heads; they were beginning to have second thoughts about their support of Henry in 1399. Their support had been decisive, and they considered that Henry owed his throne to them. Now they had these

further links with Wales: Hotspur's wife was Edmund Mortimer's sister—there was a direct contact with Glendower; Thomas Percy ruled, or was supposed to rule, in South Wales. All these dangerous elements came together in 1403 to constitute an almighty danger to the new royal house, a year of crisis and decision.

In 1403 Thomas Percy, Earl of Worcester, resigned his Lieutenancy of South Wales and Prince Henry was made Lieutenant of the Marches. Though only sixteen, henceforth he exercised actual command and took part in much fighting. The name of the (subsequent) knight, Sir John Oldcastle, which became familiarly connected with Prince Henry in tradition and legend, made its appearance at about the same time. Oldcastle came of a Welsh Border family owning land at the place of that name in Herefordshire. In 1401 he was made keeper of Builth Castle on the Wye, in the next year he served in Carmarthen with a following of lances and archers. After the battle of Shrewsbury he was given powers to pardon or punish Crown tenants in Wales who had been in arms against the King; in 1404 he was knight of the shire for his county. He continued to serve in Wales in the following years and, as a companion in arms of Prince Henry, was treated with favour and made his way up.

In the summer of 1403 the Percies decided to strike against the house of Lancaster and to make common cause with Glendower. They published a manifesto declaring that Henry had broken his oath to them at Doncaster, given in June 1399, that he would not claim the kingdom but merely his own duchy of Lancaster. Northumberland remained on guard in the North, while Hotspur marched with his forces to Chester to join up with Glendower and cut off Prince Henry at Shrewsbury. The King heard of this new trouble when he was in the Midlands, at once appreciated the danger and, with his usual energy and decision, marched west to forestall the dangerous junction of Wales with the North that might have overwhelmed his house. At Chester, Hotspur had been joined by Thomas Percy; when they arrived at Shrewsbury they were surprised to find the King's standard flying from the walls.

Henry at once marched out to give battle before Glendower could arrive, though he was

prepared to parley and give terms for the rebels' submission. This broke down, however, and in the afternoon the King led the assault, with Prince Henry in command on his left. The Prince was wounded by an arrow-shot in the face, but refused to give up; with redoubled courage his division attacked Hotspur's right uphill and rolled them back against the King's main battle. The struggle was a fierce one, with little quarter given on either side, much carnage on both. In fact, losses were equal, but Hotspur, fighting desperately, was cut down, the King raised the cry 'Harry Percy is dead', and the rebels began to give ground. It was not until nightfall that the fighting ceased and the pillaging got under way. Thomas Percy was taken alive but sentenced and beheaded on the Monday after the battle: his head was sent to decorate London bridge, Hotspur's Micklegate at York.

The genius of Shakespeare has implanted in our minds a conception of Hotspur as perennially young, a coeval and rival of Prince Henry. In fact, he was three years older than the King; he was thirty-nine when he was killed at Shrewsbury—it is said that Henry shed tears over his body. For the rest, Shakespeare may have penetrated to the essence of Hotspur: there was something not grown-up about this fighting man, who lived in the saddle, no politic head—unlike Henry and his son—a simple type, headstrong and 'intolerant of the shadow of a slight', with an impetuous stammer in his speech.

From Shrewsbury the King hurried to the North to deal with the head and fount of the rebellion, Northumberland himself. The Earl was preparing to reinforce his son, when he heard of his death; finding himself isolated, he surrendered to the King's mercy. His life was spared, but he was condemned to perpetual imprisonment, his wide lands and offices sequestrated. His office of Constable was given to the King's third son, Prince John, along with all Hotspur's estates in Cumberland.

Nevertheless, in spite of his hard-won victory at Shrewsbury, the King could make no progress in Wales. Glendower had now recruited West Wales to his cause and penetrated as far as Pembrokeshire, with the general support of the Welsh people. In September

Henry marched an army into South Wales, but again had to withdraw for lack of means to supply it; the guerrillas melted into the hills and could not be brought to battle. Lack of means was the endemic trouble of the Welsh campaigns; henceforth Henry withdrew from campaigning in Wales and left his son to carry the burden as best he could. What a strain it was we can tell from the Prince's letters, one of which we shall cite as an example of the way a fifteenth-century prince wrote to his father, the relations that subsisted between this father and this son:

My very dread and sovereign lord and father, I recommend me to your high lordship as lowly and obediently as I can, desiring always your gracious blessing and thanking you entirely for the worshipful letters that your noble highness hath written to me from your castle of Pontefract the 21st day of this present month of June. I have heard of the fair prosperity of your high and royal estate with the greatest joy that could befall me in this world. . . . My very dread and sovereign lord and father, at your high command in your other gracious letters expressed, I have removed with my poor household to the city of Worcester. . . .<sup>2</sup>

Then comes depressing news of the Welsh, who have made headway and ravaged the county of Hereford. The Prince had taken what measures he could:

I will do all that in me lies to withstand the rebels and preserve the English land to the best of my small power, according as God shall grant me grace, and trusting always in your most high lordship to be mindful of my poor estate. And forasmuch as I cannot continue here without further ordinance be made for my abiding, and since the charges on me are unsupportable, I pray you to so ordain for me in speed that I may be able to do you service here to your honour and the saving of my poor estate.

The King, in turn, did what he could and advanced as far as Worcester to his son's support. There he was forced to write to the Council in London: 'We would have you know that we should have nothing to maintain us here had we not put in pledge our poor plate and jewels, and of them made provision of money. Even therewith we can continue but a brief space, and thereafter if you make no ordinance for us, we must depart with shame and mischief and the country will be undone, which God forbid. . . .' Henry was less able to pay his

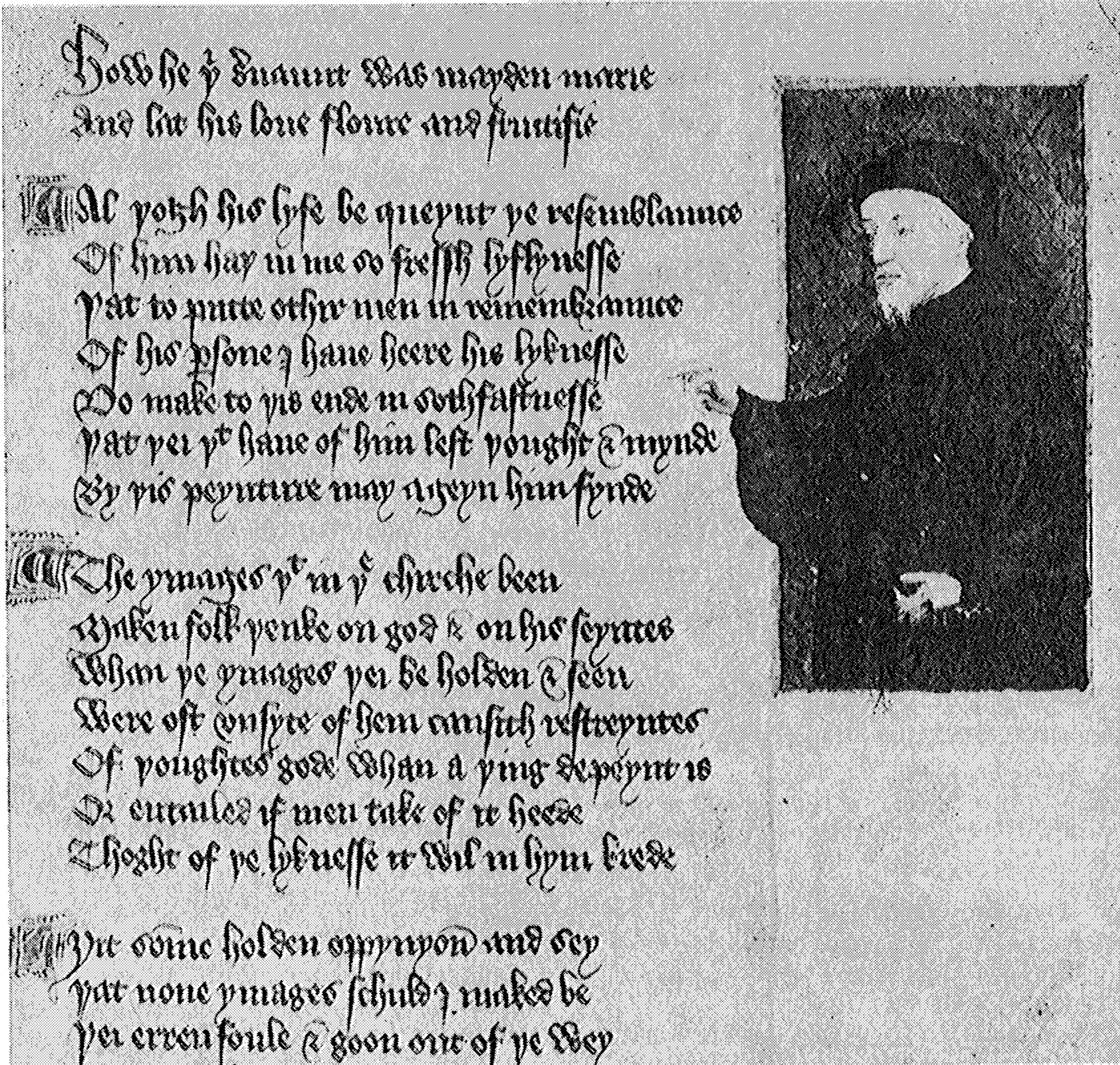
creditors than Richard had been; no wonder people became disillusioned with the promise of Lancastrian government. And yet we cannot say that it was Henry's fault: the fault was in the situation in which he was caught.

In 1424 the castles of Harlech and Aberystwyth surrendered to Glendower, thus locking the southern end of the great mountain massif under his allegiance. Much of South Wales was at his bidding too; the widow of Thomas Despenser, Richard's supporter, plotted to take the boy Earl of March thither, which showed that 'there was a harbour for the enemies of the house of Lancaster, if they could only reach it'.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile Glendower, as an independent power, was in alliance with the French, who sent him reinforcements: in 1403 their ships assailed the royal stronghold of Caernarvon, in 1404 they made raids along the West Country coast. In 1405 a French expedition landed at Milford Haven, captured Haverfordwest, assaulted Tenby, took Carmarthen, while Glendower made sure of Cardigan. Together they moved east through Glamorgan making for Worcester, and might have broken through into the Midlands at the moment when Northumberland had got free and renewed rebellion in the North.

Actually, 1405 was the year of decision for the Lancastrian king, with Glendower at his apogee and the North in question once more. This was probably the year of the famous Agreement between Northumberland and Glendower to divide up the English kingdom. Northumberland was to have the whole of the North and well into the Midlands; Glendower all Wales with the Welsh Marches; Mortimer was to have what was left. This was not sense, but fantasy. It represented pretty well the spirit of the old intriguer Northumberland, however, who had renewed contact with Glendower and Mortimer and now brought the Earl Marshal, Thomas Mowbray, Lord Bardolph and Archbishop Scrope of York into the field against the King. During these two years of tense crisis, the Archbishop had been balancing to and fro according to which side looked like winning. In 1399 he had been on Henry's side against Richard; now, the fact that he came out against

<sup>2</sup>C. L. Kingsford, *Henry V*, 47-49.

<sup>3</sup>Jacob, *op. cit*, 56.



By courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum

GEOFFREY CHAUCER, 1340-1400, *the first great English poet; from an early fifteenth-century manuscript of Hoccleve's 'De Reginine Principum'*

Henry was so much evidence that the King had lost ground in York, the northern capital, where the Archbishop was popular.

Though the royal forces were outnumbered by the Archbishop's at Shipton Moor, they managed to get hold of his sacred person, upon which his Yorkshiremen melted away, before the King arrived at Pontefract. (That grim fortress, which had seen Richard's imprisonment, must have held reminders for him.) Henry was at last angry, and determined to

make the most conspicuous example possible as a warning to all rebels. He sent for Chief Justice Gascoigne and directed him to pass sentence upon the archiepiscopal traitor. Meanwhile, wise Archbishop Arundel arrived to warn the King against sacrilege upon a consecrated person. Gascoigne refused to obey the King's orders: he urged that legally the Archbishop could not be sentenced by a secular court. Henry's latent obstinacy refused to be balked or to listen to representations. He had



From 'Bosworth Field' by A. L. Rowse. Doubleday, 1966

RICHARD II yields the crown to Bolingbroke; from a manuscript in the British Museum. 'On September 30th, 1399, HENRY IV had attained "the world, the power and the glory", in taking his cousin Richard's throne . . .'

had more than enough—like Richard before him: he ordered up another judge who obeyed his orders and Archbishop Scrope was executed outside the city.

Once more Henry had to pay the penalty. He generously, but mistakenly, allowed the Archbishop's body to be buried in his own cathedral. At once—humans being what they are—miracles began to be worked at his tomb like mad; and this nonsense continued for years, until in the end the Reformation put an end to it. But it is not surprising that York remained a focus of Ricardian sentiment, for long doubtful about the Lancastrians, and coming out later in the century in sympathy with the Yorkist cause. Even Richard III was popular in York.

Meanwhile, the slippery Northumberland escaped to Scotland. This time there was to be confiscation of his vast inheritance, and there were the lands of the other noble traitors to divide up within the Lancastrian family. Prince

Henry got noble Framlingham Castle in Suffolk; Prince John was further provided for, and he got the keepership of Calais. Henry's half-brothers, Henry and Thomas Beaufort, came in for something fat and goodly out of the Mowbray estates. (Mowbray must have regretted his equivocal relations with Richard and Henry, as much as the Percies.) A great stroke of luck now happened to Henry, and fortune turned in his favour. The heir to the Scottish throne fell into his possession: this was the beginning of an eighteen-year-long captivity for the young James I, poeticising at Windsor. Northumberland thereupon found Scotland unsafe, got away to France, whence he returned to his final defeat and death on Bramham moor in Yorkshire.

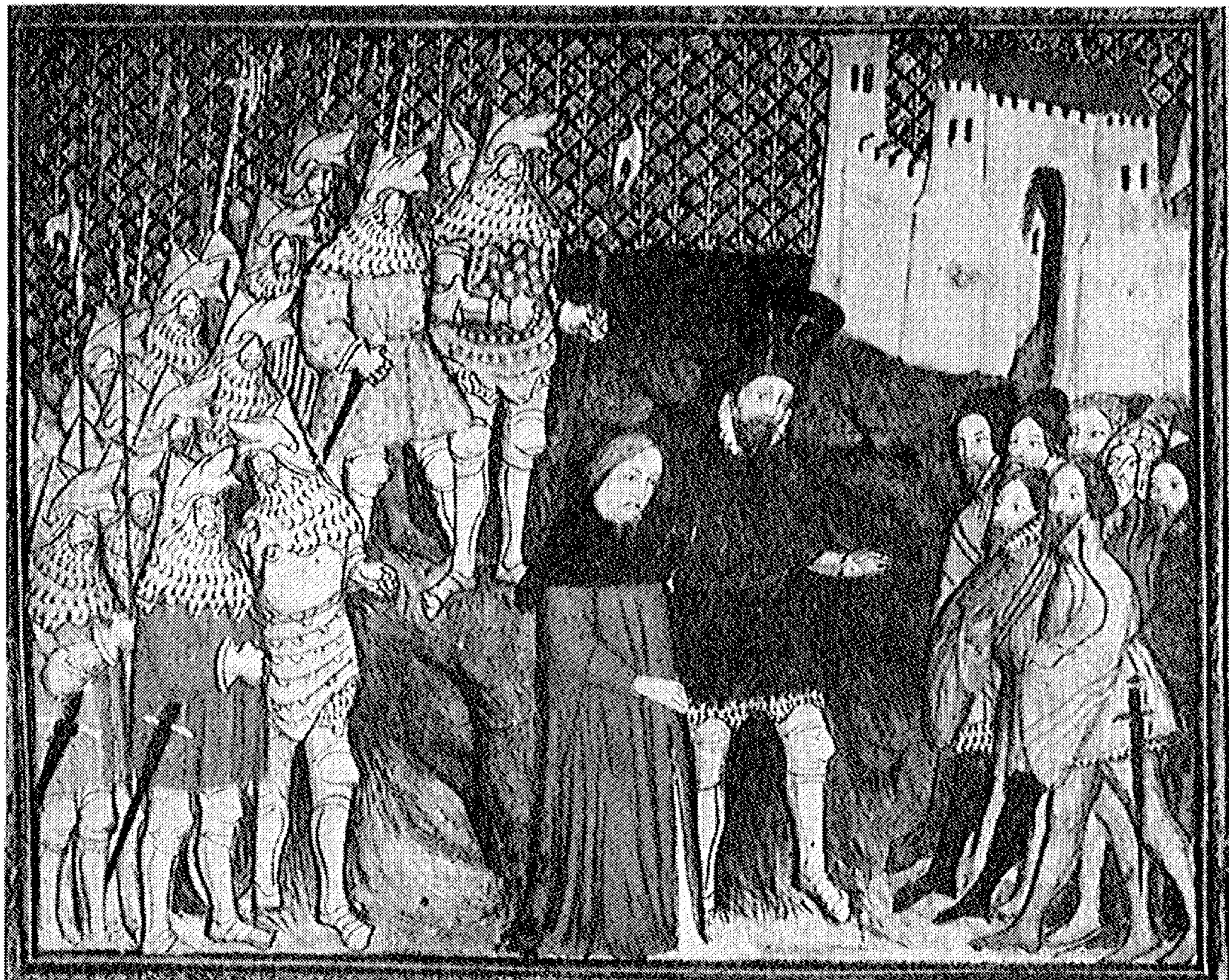
These events were severe blows to Glendower's cause, and meanwhile Prince Henry was at last making headway against the hard core of Welsh resistance. Three defeats were inflicted upon Glendower's forces in 1406, in

one of which his son Griffith was captured, in another his Chancellor. Inch by inch, the Prince's forces moved into the mountains. In 1407 elaborate preparations were made for the reduction of Aberystwyth Castle; all the tried campaigners of the Welsh war were there, the Prince's companions in arms, the Earl of Warwick, the gallant Thomas, Baron of Carew, Sir John Greindor, the hero of Grosmont, Sir John Oldcastle.

These mountain strongholds were virtually impregnable and could only be starved out. It was not until the next year that Aberystwyth surrendered. Harlech Castle, one with the rock upon which it is perched looking out over the sands of the estuary and to the mountains of Caernarvonshire, took longer to reduce. Inside was Glendower's family, with the three daughters of Edmund Mortimer, who himself

died in the siege. Not until 1409 did it surrender, starved out. Next year came Glendower's last attempt to take the offensive; in it he lost his three chief captains, including his cousin Rhys ap Tudor, put to death at Chester. Glendower himself disappeared into the mountain mists, outliving the King. When Prince Henry became king he offered the Welsh hero terms. All to no avail: nothing but silence from the mountains. Glendower's son was pardoned, but by then the father was held to be dead, and buried no one to this day knows where. He lived on in poetry and legend, and in the memory of the Welsh people. The peace of desolation covered Wales—until an almighty reversal of fortune brought the Tudors to the English throne.

*An extract from Bosworth Field to be published by Macmillan in October. Part Two follows next month.*



From 'Bosworth Field'

*Henry leads the fallen King to London; from a manuscript in the British Museum.*